The following interview was conducted with John Linder of Linder Brothers Farm located outside of Edison, Ohio. The farm is family owned and operated, and also a larger farm for the area. The Linder’s farm mainly corn, soybeans, and wheat. Outside of farming John’s wife has a separate job and John and his brother Mike are also on the Professional Tractor Pulling Circuit and travel across the United States pulling tractor at different fairs and conventions. Also mentioned in this interview the Linder’s grow soybeans for Pioneer a large seed company. The Linder’s children Katie and JoAnna were very active in 4-h and FFA and I can remember riding in the tractor and combine with John and Mike as a young child.

John: I’m John Linder, a Morrow County farmer.

Seth: Can you go ahead and describe your farm and how many acres and what you do here on the farm?

John: Okay, our operation it’s actually a partnership, that’s my brother mike, my wife Cheryl and I and we farm about 3,000 acres we are crops only, we are corn, soybean, wheat rotation, there is within that we have one separate enterprise on the farm and that is we grow seed beans for Pioneer and so part of the beans are seed and part of them are commercial.

Seth: When did you begin farming? Did you grow up on a farm?

John: Obviously Dad was a farmer probably ever since he got out of the service and so mike and I always wanted to farm. Dad had livestock and crops and Mike and I never really took to the livestock, so as time progressed the livestock operation went away and the crop operations continued. We uhh gosh been on this location, I forget how old mike was when they moved here it was probably in the mid 50’s 1955, 6, 7, 8, somewhere in there. I think I might have been born here of course born in the hospital don’t recall that for sure. This been uh this been kinda the
home site for Linder farms and like I said dad started it and he and mike became a general partnership Linder farms, and then I came into it about in the 1980 range. Probably a pretty tough time to come into it because land prices had plummeted when the farm economy plummeted and so really a poor choice at the time, but we survived that crunch and still here doing it from the same point same aspect ever since.

Seth: okay, I know you said that you had livestock when your dad originally started the farm, other than that what are kinda the major differences between your farm today and the farm you grew up on?

John: Well ya know there is not a lot of difference from the time I started into the partnership it was, we were raising seed then it was a corn soybean rotation then so it’s not a great deal of difference between then and now other than the general economics of it.

Seth: In terms of technology or government involvement, and practices what are some of the major changes in farming overall and what have been good and what of been bad?

John: Ya know any advancements in technology are good, and we like to grasp it and I think all farmers like to grasp technology and run with it, it aids in increases in production, umm reduce cost and I’m sure technology paid for that but there is generally a offset, just generally a more efficient operation with the changes in the operation since the time I started and now the biggest change would be probably the value of the crop as well as the value of the inputs probably well in recent history with the growth in ethanol obviously the profit margin has been an increase but overall if you averaged it out the margin umm probably hasn’t changed as much as we trade more dollars, cost more to put a crop out, cost more for the land, umm so the overall gross is higher the net is different in real terms, especially if you compare the mid to late 70’s range were
there was a pretty good profit range, were if you looked at the percentages I would question whether recent history is all that great compared to then because input cost were so much lower than than they are today, so it would probably higher return on investment if you will.

Seth: How do you feel that the general public perceives farmers, and farming in this general day and age?

John: Ya know that’s a pretty fair question and I guess the only I would really know how because I haven’t researched it, obviously we have had friends and I have had friends for years that had nothing to do with farming and they can’t go, they would have to go quite a ways back in generations to have a connection to a farm and so their view of farming and farmers while firmly I’m not exactly sure it’s as quite as…how do I wanna say it…really I would say they like farmers I’m not sure they like agriculture and the way it has grown. Because everybody has their own answer of ya know if they did have a grandfather that was on a farm he raised a family on 80 acres that is long since gone, a family you cannot raise a family on 80 acres without off farm income. So to have to work off the farm to enjoy an 80 acre farm becomes what’s called a hobby farm, and so it’s really lost its romance and its luster people don’t quite appreciate it as they did then, it was a hard life then and it’s still a hard life now, especially a livestock farm its year round never ending thing I mean a dairy farmer, as you well know you have worked on a dairy farm I’m sure, I don’t know when you ever really get away from it, so that is the way that the 80 acres that grandpa raised and family owned was, you never left it from the garden to the uh down to doing your own butchering. Umm you asked a little bit about the government’s role and perception of that umm the further the family get from the farms the less I understand about putting tax revenue into farms even though the government programs for farming is by and large its largest percent of dollars is about food for those that can’t afford it ya know and I guess I
don’t know how to really put that in a friendly way, we do have an obligation to protect people that can’t put food on their plate, so that is a good thing but it is the larger part of the budget, and when you look at anything that is in the farm bill you can’t cut that and you can’t reduce that and its very very protected and so but when you look at the dollars when the news or media or anyone looks up and says well how many tax dollars go into the farm bill? It’s a really big number, now how much of it goes to farmers it’s a much smaller number then what’s perceived, but I would like to think is a been effective because prior to the RFS I believe there is probably, I wanna say 18 years prior to the RFS for ethanol corn was raised at the and sold at a lower price than what the cost of production was so it was actually produced at a loss but the government programs allowed for there to be a profit and to think that the tax payer kept the profit in farming for all these years they would say well why are we doing that but when you look at the overall security and economics of food in the united states of America and look at what we pay as part of our income toward grocery’s I can’t say it’s a bad thing. It’s hard to look at that whole economic picture but if you just take that segment and say well if you couldn’t raise corn and sell it for more your cost to produce well then why and the heck did you do it, it’s a difficult thing to grasp. Why did you ya know there was a purpose there was a reason and now with the RFS were producing corn ethanol ya know the opportunity for free market if you will were you can make a profit without government payments and uh that’s kinda a new era and that’s allowed younger family members to come back into farming, if you couldn’t sell corn for a profit then why the heck dad would I wanna come back to farm? Well know that you can sell it for profit it’s a free market there has been a real spur in youth coming back to the farm and that’s really exciting ya know there are a lot of good reasons for ethanol but that’s an exciting one if you look at it from a family aspect from being able to maintain a family farm. The size of the family farm looks
commercial today and that’s not exactly how people wanna picture it when they say well
grandpa raised a family on 80 acres well yeah we look commercial today but most all of
probably 98% of farms are family farms, some of them are large but they still encompass a great
number of family members that bring that whole economic of working together and buying
together and selling together so it has changed immensely and I’m sure your discovering that in
your studies.

Seth: yes I am…going off of that umm more into the government, I know there is a lot going on
right now with the farm bill, GMO’s, and stuff like that, and through interviewing some other
guys I have asked them kinda what they think the government’s role in farming is right now and
how they feel about it, and I’ve gotten some that say the government just needs to leave
everybody alone and just let us do our own thing, but I just wanted to get your perspective on the
government’s role in agriculture and farming right now.

John: Ya know I think if you term the government the USDA I think umm everything they do for
agriculture not just the commodities wheat, corn soybeans, wheat, everything they do for
agriculture is a positive and we really don’t want them to go away, they are a positive force in
our economy. When you think of why anyone would be willing to say I want the government out
of farming it becomes a little bit more about property rights and you look at ya know our dad
probably when I was a kid, I was still riding a bicycle he had cleared a path through a wet area
were needed to be a drainage ditch cleaned up and would come in with excavating equipment
and remove the trees and dig a ditch that was more conducive to being something desirable for
drainage and it not only helped his farm but it helped the neighbors farm and that ditch ended up
being a project that encompassed more than one land owner. It was very common that there may
have been some subsidized dollars to help to that because the soil and water service saw the
value in having proper drainage and yet when dad finished that he decided he wanted grass on both sides of the drainage ditch to the tune of probably to the tune of 15 feet on either side so he could go down either side mow it down keep the trees back keep the soil in place so that ya know if he needed to do any kind of maintenance on that its real simple to do it and it kept it clean and caused him to not have to spend a lot of dollars on bringing someone in to re-excavate the bottom of it so it would flow water again. And that wasn’t umm uncommon but in a way leaving that much land on either side as idle unproductive land was really uncommon, we like to farm from edge to edge if we can. But dad said this is good cause this is gonna help hold the soil well and he was right and it wasn’t probably until in the uh early 90’s maybe mid 90’s that there was a lot of values placed on leaving that grass filter strip and so the government the soil and water side started paying farmers to leave grass filter strips that dad had done for 30 plus years before that on his own and now they were willing to pay people to do that. By and large farmers and land owners like to be good stewards just like I described dad and so when you are a good steward of your own property because that soil is so valuable to you without it you lose your nutrients you lose everything you lose your ability to raise a crop. He uh kinda had the foresight as well as other farmers real close to here that saw the value of keeping that soil in place. No one really wants their farm to be washed away in a really big rain and have to deal with the loss of soil. So when you think about well we are really good stewards, do we really need someone else telling us what to do that’s where the property rights and the loose term of government comes in and I would like the government to stay out of my hair, and stay out of my business cause were doing the best we can with what we have to keep what we have in really good condition, I don’t need someone telling me what to do. Well that’s not usually popular but you get a 1% percent of the population in agriculture that does the wrong thing and how do you turn them so that they do
the right thing, how do you pressure them, the easiest thing is regulation so if you regulate the 1% that’s not doing it right, you regulate the 99 percent that are and you have angered them. Ya know we are already doing this why are you throwing this on me? So if I make a mistake or if I have a 5 or 6 inch rain and it causes problems their gonna come back and say you’re not doing your job, well yes I did I just couldn’t account for a 50 year flood ya know so that is kinda a misnomer when people think well I don’t want the government on the farm well that’s probably really more why, they are a little apprehensive about regulation and here in recent, there was a wall street journal were OHSAA is coming to the farm. That’s really kinda fascinating because congress said unless you have more than 10 employees or more on the farm OHSAA has no control over regulating your work environment. Well their coming back and saying well no there are grain storages on that farm and after harvest it is a commercial enterprise to store grain and make money it’s no longer a farming enterprise so because of that we don’t have to wait for the 10 employee limit were gonna come in and start regulating through that and that perceived hole in the way it’s written and their gonna come in and look at everything the farm does and say yeah you’re not exempt. There was a farm in Missouri in that article that was mentioned that the fine was 130,000 dollars for that operation and they only I can’t recall if they only had one employee, I think they did they only had one out of family employee on that farm and the fine from OHSAA was 130,000 okay no one really wants to think of that okay so yeah there is some horror stories out there so that’s why folks like to broadly brush it as government out of my farm. Well ya really don’t want government out of your farm you want sensible logic in what participation we have in interactions we have.

Seth: I know there is a lot going on with farm subsidies how do those affect your farm if you receive them?
John: Ya know farm subsidies have been part of the farm bill for many many years and if they went away, as if they went away as if you use the term direct payments umm from the last farm bill if they went away ya know it’s not like its detrimental but it really helps in a low return environment. It also helps when someone has a disaster if ya know if weather took its crop to a terrible loss yeah that kind of subsidy is kinda nice but we have all been trying to go toward a pay as you go plan and using crop insurance and yet that is subsidized too, if you took away that subsidy of crop insurance I don’t know that there would be a crop insurance program I don’t know that anyone would be able to afford the premium to have the coverage that they really need. So would I mind as much if direct payments went away probably not, would I want to see crop insurance subsidized in a way that we see today go away I really would not like to see that. One of the problems with having crop insurance go away would be if we were coming off a big supply of corn the year before we had a really short supply of corn if we turn around and go back to umm economics that are not good to plant corn so everybody says well I can’t afford to plant corn we will plant more beans more wheat or whatever and a lot less corn and all of the sudden we will come up with a short crop of corn and then the world is suffering for corn we need an incentive to keep a how do I wanna say a reasonable supply of corn in the pipeline for years to come, and crop insurance encourages a guy to take a chance and well ya know if I can break even or do something good on corn there is a chance it might be a winner if somewhere in the world has a problem but without crop insurance they may say well I can’t take that risk I’m just gonna plat it to beans and if they really need corn they will be paying for it and ill plant more corn then and that’s not a good plan, ya know the government used to build grain bins and store corn just for security. It really wouldn’t be a good plan to have us just say on one year at a time
basis say well I’m gonna wait till they really need corn then before I plant it again well that’s never been a good plan. So yeah we like to see crop insurance subsidies stay.

Seth: Now I’m gonna ask a few question on the role of women on farms. What was the role of your mom on the farm when you were growing up?

John: Well obviously she was care giver for the kids and she was home maker if you will and that’s a pretty broad term, umm but she also worked on the farm so they had money to pay for health insurance and doctor bills, and put food on the table that we couldn’t produce on the farm and yeah she always took care of meals for anyone that was working and primary gopher when ever somebody needed a part and no one was available, there are just all kinds of seemingly menial but really important things that women did then, as today ya know you could find women then that actually were the tractor and combine operators and you can find them today. Roles really haven’t changed much other than you find women tend to take a more active management if you will because there’s more paper work than there ever was, more check flow, more bills to pay, then there ever war there is the accounting part of it. There is a lot of management that demands time and man power to handle and I think women tend to go more that way more so than towards the tractors. Mom did a little plowing she probably ran the grain cart just a little bit too. Cheryl (wife), not so much that’s just not her cup of tea but you can ask her to do just about anything else and if she can find the time she will do her.

Seth: Through some of my research what I noticed was that uhh sometimes farmers may say that women didn’t play as large of role initially as in the physically aspect but when they got into the bookkeeping and accounting, they realized if it wasn’t for the women they wouldn’t have records
and without them none of this would be happening. And it was really interesting to see that come out.

John: Yeah probably never really thought about it much until its gone then they are saying oh my gosh they are playing a much larger role then what was thought.

Seth: Do Katie or Jo Anna (daughters) play a role on the farm anymore?

John: Ya know they both expressed interest in having some type of ownership, actually Jo Anna works off the farm but works out of the farm office she just has a job she can work from home and its kind nice someone is in here when were not. Umm she will do anything she can from meals to gopher to whatever she can do that way. Katie is really still just coming out of college to where she really throughout school and college she has not had the opportunity to be here at the most heaviest times of work activity the seasonal terms of farming don’t lend themselves to education as you well know being there when things are really hot and heavy, but umm yeah Katie has expressed interest in driving truck and she has been in the seat of the combine and she has been in the tractor with very little alone time and never felt like she spent enough time there. She never felt like she spent enough time there to be turned loose and probably rightfully so if she doesn’t feel it then I guess I don’t either, but yeah the future of what they want to remain attached to the farm to retain ownership it will be those kind of management decisions and just things you can do that are background that are so crucial to today’s farming operation and umm yeah. They both like to cook so that’s awesome I get to eat haha.

Seth: Now we will move into the section on the Movers and Shuckers in the area. Umm I guess there are a lot of mixed feeling on Movers and Shuckers from different people. I guess how do
you feel about the Movers and Shuckers moving into this area and how they are kinda affecting smaller farms and even if they have affected you in any way?

John: Ya know it’s really difficult to sit and bad mouth anyone without putting their shoes on cause you have no idea what their ultimate goal is no idea where they come from, how they had to leave the farm and how they have an enormous resource to come back to the farm okay, some of what you hear is very difficult to make sense of but there again you just don’t have the whole picture to make a whole decision. Ya know for us having conversations with the people involved in our operation including the land owners its probably been a good thing to have those conversations because if you look west were productivity is higher, there is more completion for land and prices than we have had in the eastern part of the corn belt for some years now. So really our operation such as the one mentioned are they really umm doing anything that’s not already being done and having had a history of in agriculture in the Midwest, no there is nothing new to what they are doing. It’s just we have maybe had a little shelter ya know cause until ethanol, we had a negative basis for commodities and we really didn’t get to enjoy as high of productivity so the returns on investment were not there in the eastern part of the corn belt as they were in the western part of the corn belt. As we saw those returns escalate we knew it was coming everybody thinks, ya know we have this bad habit, I wouldn’t saw we do on this farm but in general you watch productivity go up and you have an opportunity to sell corn we will just use that as the topic at a higher price all of the sudden you have a good year you say man I’m pretty good I raise a pretty good crop and man vie already sold it I’m not to bad at marketing either so look at this return I think I could do better than my neighbor I think I’ll have interest in what his landowners grumbling about maybe I’ll get involved and see if he is interested in me. That’s never been our practice here if it doesn’t if they don’t come to us then we generally don’t
go to them, we’ve had several opportunities for some pretty nice pieces of ground offered to us and we went back said we need to speak to the guy that’s operating and make sure there isn’t some reason this fella is getting away from him because he is a good operator too. We passed on those, those folks actually after spoke with them realized what they were doing wrong and they were able to keep the land lord happy so we probably we’ve turned 3 or 4 hundred acres down just for that reason when probably all we had to do was say yes and it was ours cause they came to us and offered it. So our uhh that would suggest a little different ethic ya know ya got to really be careful saying that and id really not like to be quoted as saying that because the converse side is that I’m saying that everybody else is unethical that has gained ground in this time period and that’s not necessarily true, somebody wasn’t happy and somebody wasn’t communicating well so ya know it changed hands and it happens, somebody’s not going to see it the same way all their life and so is that really ethics maybe not that’s just about communication and good sound practices. Yeah I would really hate to call anyone a problem because we should have seen it coming and we should have been ready to address it long before they started taking ads out long before there was visibility. It was the story in the wind that just nobody could pass up and talk about. But it’s unbelievable the kind of money that’s coming in to agriculture when you see returns or potential for returns on investment like we have recently, you never know where that money could come from. Ya know just something to think about when you look at livestock and I don’t know what you have seen or surveyed in livestock and every time a livestock farmer gets up near retirement it’s a little easier to keep grain operation and let the livestock operation go because now it becomes seasonal and I can handle that were I don’t have to have the year round. So anytime you see a prolonged downturn in returns for livestock those that have put enough years in and can do without it will say I don’t think I need to do this anymore I think I’m gonna
do something a little more simpler which is take care of the crops on the same farm I just practically cut my work load in half. I’m gonna do the half and I’m gonna relax if every time we see a downturn in livestock or the elderly decide okay that’s enough someone else is gonna take and make up the difference because its supply and demand and there is good demand meat growing, so someone got larger every time someone else smaller said I’m done. So as the age of the operator matures livestock operations grow because the small ones dwindle so do you see that in commodities, not necessarily its kinda the opposite if the value of the commodities and chance for return is greater you see more of rush to get in and if you’re gonna get in ya almost need size to make it work so either you going somebody else or you plan something big. So the gentleman you spoke of said y aim gonna come in and I’m gonna make it big because there is no sense in doing it little it cost too much to stay small. Ya can’t buy small equipment and work your way in as near as you can but big equipment and run the numbers on big farming so if you got the money that’s where it’s at.

Seth: That is all I have question wise. Is there anything else you want to add?

John: mmhhm I really can’t think of anything, I think one of the things we need to remember is there is a lot of good organizations within agriculture that are trying to keep the family farm visible keep the family farm viable because ya know it’s a very high percentages of any type of agriculture that’s family, so yeah we’ve got support. And we really shouldn’t think of all government as bad because their supporters. One of the things that happens for corn just as an example is the markets for corn have grown, we have the domestic livestock which has grown we have the domestic ethanol which is swaying because of the tax on the RFS but it’s still there, the other big market is exports. And because of last year’s droughts we lost big on exports they don’t need what we have near as much now that we have the supply, they have found that they
can deal with other sources because they couldn’t buy it from us so the money spent to market our grain with associations and affiliations the united states department of agriculture is very active in trying to keep us open to those markets that are off on foreign soils. Its big to the tax payer that we have commodities moving out of the country so we have foreign dollars coming back in buying those commodities its commerce that’s what it’s all about and without USDA we would probably be having a really hard time with having any type of export program so yeah we really need to temper our disdain for government because we really do need USDA. Yupp that’s about all I have.

Seth: Thank you.

John: Yeah your welcome I really hope it helps.

Seth: I really appreciate it.

John: It will be fun to see what to come up with